

The Micropolitics of Class and Class Consciousness: A Reading of Akhtaruzzaman Elias' *Khoabnama*

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Abstract

In classical Marxism, the logic of class struggle is located in the antagonism between two major classes of the capitalist system. However, the “agrarian question,” and uneven development of capitalism across the globe – along with colonial and postcolonial realities – have problematized the bipolar idea of class and revolutionary politics. Bangladeshi writer Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ fictions embody the contradictions arising from the disparity between the structural dimension of class and its articulation in emancipatory movements. This paper, focusing its investigation on Elias’ magnum opus *Khoabnama*, explores the micropolitical and dynamic dimensions of class by addressing Elias’ depiction of the inner contradictions of subjective experiences and internal dialectics of class struggle. The micrological divisions within a class and the implications associated with such divisions are outlined here. Besides, the paper also offers an organic understanding of class consciousness which develops from the subjective experience of exploitation and resistance and the negotiation with the immanent potential of social transformation.

Keywords: Class, Class Consciousness, Micropolitics, Contradictions, Overdetermination.

Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ novels, *Chilekothar Sepai* (1986) and *Khoabnama* (1996), set against grand historical events, both explore people’s response to revolutionary possibilities and negotiation with the immanent potential of social transformation. *Chilekothar Sepai* portrays the tempestuous time of 1969 when the people of former East Pakistan stormed the streets demanding the fall of West Pakistani military dictatorship. *Khoabnama* is set around 1946-48, a period overlapping the Pakistan Movement, the Partition of Bengal, and the Tebhaga Movement. The Tebhaga Movement took place in the northern part of Undivided Bengal when peasants, who were required to share half of their produced crops with the landowners, demanded two-thirds of the share. In both novels, an astute portrayal of the marginalized urban proletariat and rural peasantry is observed embodying Elias’ dialectical investigation of individual and social history. His exploration of people’s subjective experience of oppression and resistance opens a space for another discussion – how the questions of class and class consciousness are articulated in his novels and where they stand in



dialogue with socio-historical contexts and the global tradition of Marxist thought.

The question of class is of paramount importance in the Marxist framework, for it was Marx's consideration of class conflict as the driving force of history that triggered what has come to be known as "historical materialism." Immanuel Wallerstein outlines a threefold contribution of Marx's development of the concept of class. First of all, Marx sees history as the history of class struggle; secondly, the idea that a class-in-itself is not necessarily always a class-for-itself; and finally, the argument that the foundational conflict in a capitalist system is the conflict between the owner and non-owner of the means of production – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Wallerstein, "Class" 115). In classical Marxism, both class politics and theoretical class analysis locate the logic of class struggle in the antagonism between two major classes of the capitalist system. Besides, the consciousness of the revolutionary class is attributed to the consciousness of the proletariat only. This approach, along with the dominant mode of viewing the history of capital, is conspicuously Eurocentric (Chakrabarty 7). In addition, the dominance of the bipolar model of class relegates the peasantry to a status of a conservative and reactionary class (Marx and Engels 48). Peasantry is deemed a backward section of capitalism which constitutes the "agrarian question" – the reflection of an incomplete transition to capitalism (Bottomore 412). However, colonial and postcolonial realities due to the uneven development of capitalism outside the metropolis and peasant involvement in anti-colonial and anti-ruling class revolutions have further problematized the classical idea of class and revolutionary politics. The universalizing discourse of Marxist theory and praxis is contaminated by the particularity of local histories as well which hindered its translation in non-European contexts, particularly in South Asia. In such a context, the contributions of Akhtaruzzaman Elias' fictions in understanding class and class consciousness could be worthy of academic investigation as the writer has been called "empathetically Marxist" (Dasgupta 57). This paper will focus on *Khoabnama* with occasional reference to *Chilekothar Sepai*.

The spatio-temporal settings of *Khoabnama* are the agrarian Bengal of the last half of the 1940s. An agrarian society is often called a feudal society but the European connotation of Feudalism fails to correspond fully to an apparently pre-capitalist mode of production in a non-European context. Agrarian Bengal was an amalgam of many opposing forces and drives as it was ruled by a colonial power whose policies were determined by the logic of global capitalism.

Andre Gunder Frank thinks that the economic system of the world has existed as a single form for some centuries. What makes the world-economy apparently non-uniform and disparate is its unequal and uneven development over space and time (Frank 71). The first wave of European colonization engendered the advent of a complex system under the umbrella of a single economy. Wallerstein explicitly calls this system "capitalist in form," in existence since the 16th century ("Patterns" 59). The colonies had pre-capitalist modes of production and proved to be fertile lands

for increasing accumulation of capital (Marx, qtd. in Frank 76-77). This world-economy as a systematic unit enveloped the globe by embodying an “extensive and relatively complete social division of labor with an integrated set of production processes which relate to each other through a market” (Wallerstein, “Patterns” 59). Since the 16th century, a capitalist world-system has enwrapped the globe that has subsumed all other production processes. Besides, the moment capital goes global, the moment it shifts from the formal to the real subsumption of the labor process, it develops itself only in certain parts but leaves most of the parts underdeveloped in its global operation. It is not solely a temporal feature but part of a structural and spatial relationship as well, as Gunder Frank theorizes. Bengal too, a victim of the uneven development of capitalism with its apparent pre-modern mode of production, functioned within the capitalist world-economy.

Hamza Alavi notes that the British colonial project of Permanent Settlement in 1793 transformed the nature of landed property of Bengal from a “feudal” to a “bourgeois” type and thus pre-capitalist agrarian societies seemed to have a capitalist appearance. However, Partha Chatterjee thinks that this bourgeois transformation under colonial rule is contradictory and ambiguous, as the legal structure of property relation attained a bourgeois character only but the “semi-feudal” mode of bondage and exploitation was strengthened (170). Such a contradictory amalgam of material and political conditions directly affected the class question of Bengal and its reflection is evident in *Khoabnama*.

The social formation portrayed in *Khoabnama* is centered on agrarian rural Bengal. In such a society, the class structure is not that rigid and cannot be readily reduced to objective wholes and the peasant question arises exactly from this phenomenon of the differentiated peasantry. Utsa Patnaik observes, “the peasantry is highly differentiated economically into more or less distinct classes” and considers this differentiation within peasantry a powerful tool to understand the class reality of South Asian agrarian societies (A82). On the basis of labor-exploitation criterion and whether wage or rent predominates as a form of exploitation, she classifies the class structure of agrarian society into five categories – the land owners of the feudal types and capitalists, the rich peasants, the middle peasants, the poor peasants, and the landless fulltime agricultural laborers (A85). Patnaik’s model is arranged in a hierarchical order on the basis of the concentration of the means of production. Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ fictional representation of class corresponds to this reality of differentiated peasantry too.

Apparently, on a vertical plane, the dominant class in agrarian Bengal in the late British colonial period was the *Zamindars*, the feudal land owners. No *Zamindar* character appears in *Khoabnama* but there are implicit references to a *Zamindar*. The apparently dominant class in rural Bengal then was the *Jotedars* like the family of Sharafat Mondol. *Jotedars* were a group of landowners but had to pay taxes to *Zamindars*. Though, according to Patnaik’s categorization, they belonged to the

same class with *Zamindars* as they relied entirely on the labor of others, the fact that they had to pay taxes to *Zamindars* put them in a lower stratum. They could be called rich peasants but they did not engage themselves in any manual work as Patnaik's rich peasants do. They used to lease out their lands to the sharecroppers and sometimes directly hired labor to cultivate their lands. The way they became landowners follows the process of primitive accumulation. In the novel, Bulu, who owned four acres of land, had to surrender it to Mondol for failing to pay back the debts with exorbitant interests (Elias, *Khoabnama* 360). He resorted to cultivating the same land as a sharecropper that he once owned. Marx calls this process of primitive accumulation as "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" (*Capital* 875). Here one finds a complete separation between the worker and the ownership of the conditions of production and the commodity simultaneously that alienates him from the realization of his labor. Even though there used to be a contract of fifty-fifty share of the crops, in the name of irrigation cost and rental charge of cattle and ploughs, Mondol deducted more crops from the sharecroppers' share. The remaining crops were hardly enough for subsistence. Mondol took away the land that belonged to the family of blacksmiths in the same way (Elias, *Khoabnama* 338). He also took the lease of Katlahar Bil, a vast waterbody, from the *Zamindar* which was considered a clan property of the fishermen where they could fish for free (347). After Mondol had occupied it, their right to fish ended. That is how this class of landowners accumulated their wealth and maintained their class power. The increasing accumulation of the *Jotedars* coincides with the increasing differentiation too. Partha Chatterjee finds that "a new stratum of sharecroppers" was created from rising differentiation in the debt-bound peasantry as agriculture was gradually being commercialized and the "effective control of land" was being transferred to *Jotedar* creditors due to indebtedness (198).

If the class structure of agrarian Bengal of the 1940s is plotted along the y-axis, the dominant groups are found on the positive axis and on the negative are the dominated groups. In the novel, an array of such groups is found that belong to the negative axis of capital. Here, the class question gets a little complicated as the dominated groups again get distributed along the horizontal x-axis making the picture of a differentiated peasantry conspicuous.

From Patnaik's postulation, it can be derived that the negative axis begins with the middle peasants. They are further sub-divided into "upper middle peasants" and "lower middle peasants" who are respectively "net exploiter of others' labor" and exploited itself (Patnaik A85). Hurmatullah belongs to the "lower middle peasants" who needs to work in others' lands besides their own lands to subsist. Then there are the "poor peasants" who either work as sharecroppers or hire out their labor for wages. Tamij falls in this group. In Patnaik's final category – a class of full-time laborers who do not "operate any land at all" and whose subsistence is entirely dependent on hiring out labor for wages – Tamij's father and early Tamij are discernable. There are other professional groups who cannot be classified within

the rigid objectification of the agrarian class structure. Among them are fishermen (*majhi*), blacksmiths (*kamar*), and oilmen (*kolu*) who are also seasonal farmers. Their lands were taken away by the *Jotedars* too and as a result, they ended up as sharecroppers. The appropriation of Katlahar Bil drove the fishermen away from their traditional profession. The oilmen too were turning to full-time farming because an oil-mill was installed nearby. The subordination of these marginalized people to *Jotedars* stands as an illustration of the formal subsumption of the labor process under capital.

The exploration of differentiation beyond the rigid objectification reveals the micropolitics of class antagonism which can be discerned through the micrological divisions within the same objective class. In this paper, the idea of micropolitics is borrowed from Michel Foucault's postulation of microphysics of power where he broods on the infiltration of the mechanism of power into the minuscule of the society, to "the most minute and distant elements," ultimately ensuring an "infinitesimal distribution of power relations" (216). Here, the idea corresponds to the influence of the minutiae social and cultural elements on class reality at the minuscule level. All the categories on the negative y-axis live under almost the same economic conditions and the margins separating lower-middle peasants, poor-peasants, landless laborers, and other professional groups are significantly narrow. Moreover, they are subjected to the same intensity of exploitation. In them, the alienation between the producer and the means of production is evident. Here, they are forcibly being torn from their means of subsistence and hurled into the labor market as free, unprotected, and rightless peasants. Farmers found their crops appropriated by the *Jotedars* who evicted the fishermen too. These evenly exploited groups live under the same economic conditions, yet there are hints of division and antagonism among themselves. This division suffers double sessions of determinations – the economic and the superstructural.

The differentiation within the peasantry, as already shown in relation to Patnaik's categorization, stands as the economic manifestation of this division. In spite of their similar material condition, the degree of relation to the means of production and the engagement of their labor have differentiated the peasantry and rendered them to inhabit "contradictory locations within class relations" (Wright 16). However, what is evident in the novel are the superstructural factors that organically create divisions. Hereditary professional status which often looks like caste division is one such factor.

The difference among the *chasha*, *majhi*, *kamar*, and *kolu* is mainly the difference of status. In Elias' *Khoabnama*, the farmers think that they belong to a higher status group than the fishermen. The fishermen contrarily deem the oilmen as lowborn. Inter-group marriage is strictly discouraged. Abitan, a woman from the fishermen community after marrying Gofur, an oilman, was practically ostracized from her paternal community. When Muslim League activist Abdul Kader endorsed this

marriage, he was censured by the village elders (361). When Tamij first approached Hurmatullah's daughter Fuljan, though reciprocating initially, she later rejected him, saying, "You bloody son of a fisherman! How dare you try to touch the sky?" (422). Tamij aspires to be a full-time farmer, abandoning his ancestral profession. He was assigned by Mondol to cultivate a piece of land adjacent to Hurmatullah's. When Tamij for the first time went to visit that land, Hurmatullah openly expressed his contempt and disgust by saying, "No way I'm going to work with this bloody son of a fisherman. I will ask Mondol to relieve me of my duties" (378). Later, while working, if thirsty, had Tamij ever asked for a sip or two from his water bottle, Hurmatullah always pretended not to hear him (393). Hurmatullah also made a big fuss when Tamij's father sat beside him at the funeral banquet of Mondol's grandson (431-32). He could not bear the idea of sharing the water bottle or sitting beside a fisherman in a social gathering. This awareness of status defined their position in their social milieu.

Wallerstein identifies "social strata" as an "internal intellectual uncertainty" in the question of class ("Class" 116). Social strata, which is associated with social status too, is not solely determined by the economic base. Karl Kautsky contends that a number of class conflicts mentioned by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* are actually "conflicts between status groups" (Bottomore 84). Later Marxists also had to deal with this complication arising from the social ranking in relation to the basic class question – "the immediate and transitional strata" that obscures "the class boundaries" (Bottomore 85). The micrological divisions within a class, owing mostly to the status factor that obfuscates class boundaries, are more of superstructural elements. Nicos Poulantzas thinks that even though class is defined principally by the production process, i.e., economic base, it is wrong to conclude this base structure can alone determine classes. The superstructural elements like the political and the ideological ones have decisive influences too (Poulantzas 14). However, Poulantzas' insistence on superstructural determination comes from the idea that a class springs as a class only when it is equipped with "class consciousness and political organization" (Bottomore 85). Althusser too thinks that the "capital-labor contradiction" is prescribed by the elements of superstructure like the state, ideology, religion, culture, and political movements ("Contradiction" 106). This "capital-labor contradiction" leads to the "contradictory locations within class relations" as inhabited by the micrological groups.

Any theoretical analysis bears the burden of maintaining certain objectivity, and therefore, runs the risk of seeming mechanistic. However, fictions can overcome this barrier and explore the realm of subjectivity more deeply. In Elias' novels, this advantage adds some organic perspectives to understand the nuances associated with class. Hasan Al Zayed thinks that Elias is more interested in "the inner dialectic of people and their character" and "retains the inner dialectic of class struggle by paying attention to its micropolitical dimensions, deftly portraying the internal dynamism of class struggle as such" (237, 240). Zayed insists on concentrating

on Elias' depiction of "class within a class" to understand the micropolitics of class antagonism. Class antagonism does not necessarily exist only between opposing objective classes. The hint of antagonism also shadows over the same objective class. Though in a different context, Gayatri Spivak also reflects on the internal divisions within an objective class, as she says, "the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (284). In her attempt to critique the position of people in Ranajit Guha's construction of a dynamic stratification of colonial social production, she argues that the idea of people can only be perceived as an "identity-in-differential" (Spivak 284). Here the subaltern class is found differentiated into broader subcategories – the lowest strata of rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants, and upper-middle-class peasants along with the poor peasants. The micrological divisions within those subcategories are not explicitly mentioned but the concept of identity-in-differential hints on further micrological divisions.

Even though the exploration into the micropolitical helps to dive deeper into the miniscule of class reality and the infinitesimal level of individual and social life, it also takes back to the basic question about class. What is a class and how can it be defined and understood? Do the micrological entities pose as separate classes? What is the ultimate implication of micropolitical understanding of class in terms of revolutionary praxis?

Micropolitical understanding of class posits some challenges to the classical bi-polar model. Erik Olin Wright finds this polarized concept of class misleading for he thinks that the class relations in concrete societies are spread across various complex spatial and temporal realities. He points out two complexities of this bipolar simplification. Firstly, there coexist various kinds of class relations in most societies, and secondly, class relations are associated with "complex bundles of rights and powers, rather than simple, one dimensional property rights" (Wright 12). Wright's engagement with the concept of class is based on the idea of rights and powers which are associated with the production process and he considers the sum total of such rights and powers to be the social relations of productions (10). Wright's ideas are more aligned with a non-binary, micropolitical understanding of class as he is reluctant to reduce the class structure of a society on the basis of property right over the means of production. In *Khoabnama* too, as already shown, the question of power and status often determines the contradictory locations of micrological groups more than the ownership of the means of production.

Ernesto Laclau questions the concept of class as a universal category resting on the idea of a teleological "homogeneity of social agents" where the proletariat is the sole agent of global emancipation ("Questions" 7-8). For Laclau, society appears as a space of plurality where different groups articulate their demands through particularistic languages and what is thought as universal is actually contaminated by the contingent interventions and articulations of the particulars ("Identity" 51, 55). He further thinks of the notion of universal class as a "laborious political

construction” which fails to stand out as the automatic and necessary movements of a structure (“Identity” 52). Moreover, Laclau argues that the articulating function and the intuitive content of class is lost because a universal working class no longer exists for it has become a part of the chain of the plurality of identities that strives for emancipation (“Constructing” 297-8). The rise of identity politics in the last decades of the 20th century articulating multiple subjectivities has led to the gradual absence of empirical agents embodying a universal identity. The proliferation of symbolic class – the managers, academics, lawyers, and so on – appears as one of the reasons Laclau disregards the universality of the working class. This symbolic class along with the traditional middle class and the people excluded from the circuit of production relations (such as the permanently unemployed and homeless) are increasingly failing to resonate with the voice of the working class. This proliferation of division within the universal category of class unsettles the traditional concept of class. However, Žižek contradicts Laclau’s idea that the category of class and class struggle as movement for emancipation are becoming irrelevant due to the advent of the plurality of political subjectivities. Žižek thinks that the diminishing significance of class struggle is owed to the result of the “paradox of ‘oppositional determination’” of capitalism (320). Laclau thinks that the category of class is only a part of the enumerative chain of identities but for Žižek, besides being a part in the series, it also “predominates over the rest” (320). Žižek further argues that the apparent dissolution of class and the proliferation of plural identities are themselves the result of the dynamics of deterritorialization of global capitalism (319).

Class, originally, is the expression of social relations of production. This relation is determined by the ownership of the means of production. In any mode of production, as Marx explicitly writes, “the direct relation between the owners of the conditions and the direct producers ... reveals the innermost secret, the hidden foundation, of the entire social edifice” (qtd. in Bottomore 85). So, class is determined through the mediation of production relation. It is a dialectical category of both capital and means of production. Basically, from this relationship comes the bipolar model of class in modern capitalist society. However, in apparently pre-capitalist modes of production too, class ultimately goes down to the relationship with the means of production. Here, the scheme by which the production process within pre-capitalist root was incorporated by the capitalist economy is the formal subsumption of labor under capital. In the formal subsumption of labor, the production process does not undergo a revolutionary transformation as capitalist proper but the existing process becomes the process of accumulating capital itself (Marx, *Capital* 1019). Here, an existing labor process is subsumed by capital which was developed by more of an outmoded mode of production (1021). Capital takes over an already established and available labor power. In the functional contour of formal subsumption, a peasant becomes a day laborer, or an independent peasant find himself at the disposal of the owner of money or land and gets bound up by a contract. The labor process and the production process goes on as before but it

comes under the subordination of capital. A similar thing has happened in the case of Bengal. A rising class of landowners, the *Jotedars*, began accumulating capital by formally subsuming the available labor process. The way they became landowners is more like primitive accumulation in nature and it shows a hint of a semi-feudal mode of agricultural production taking a capitalist turn. They mostly acquired lands by seizing them from immediate producers – small peasants or the independent petty-producers. Either the peasants were held by unpayable amount of debts with exorbitant interests or they were forced by political pressure to sell the land. Either way, the producer lost the land and no longer had any ownership of the means of production. As for the micrological categories, even if they are divided within themselves and have an antagonistic attitude against each other, they have the same relation with capital and the means of production. *Kolu, chasha, majhi, kamaar* – all have the same relation with the production process – they do not own it. Their labor has been subsumed by capital, making them flock under the umbrella of a single class. The division within them, the stratification on the grounds of status denotes the qualitative division of labor – the social division of labor within a class, not classes proper. The symbolic classes of the contemporary world too, although overshadows the class antagonism, are not classes proper in the structural sense. However, Slavoj Žižek, though in stark contrast with Laclau, also concedes that the split between micrological categories of class are growing more “radical than the traditional class divisions,” that these categories are attaining their own world-views and almost an ontological dimension (323).

The crisis that appears here is that of the paradox between the structural formation of class and its articulating manifestation. Class is determined by capital's relationship with labor where the ownership and control over the means of production mediates this determining relation. However, the fact that social division of labor is increasingly dividing the class of the non-owners of the means of production internally needs to be acknowledged too. Because of this division and the advent of newer and plural political subjectivities, class struggle has been relegated from its place as a site of primary struggle even in the leftist tradition of the contemporary world. But the problem is that if class is categorized on the notion of status and power, then it falls into an endless array of micrological categories. This postmodern trap of endlessness does not offer any substantial contribution in the field of emancipatory praxis. However, the antagonism among those micrological groups, though not class antagonism proper, indeed needs to be addressed, for this micropolitics of class has a determining effect on the articulation of class consciousness too.

A class cannot be fully defined in terms of its objective condition; the subjective awareness of this objective situation is indispensable in understanding a class (Bottomore 89-90). When it has a collective understanding of the common interest and in turn organize as a united force to accomplish the class goal, a class is said to attain class consciousness. It is generally understood that the rise of a radical class organization coincides with the process by which class consciousness is formed.

Classical Marxism is preoccupied with the consciousness of the proletariat, the subjugated class in capitalism (Marx and Engels 47). Peasants, contrarily, are deemed a class devoid of class consciousness and thus a class-in-itself. The dichotomy of class-in-itself and class-for-itself engenders from Marx himself as peasants are considered a class on the basis of “economic conditions of existence” and not a class for their failure of producing “a feeling of community, national links or a political organization” (*Brumaire* 239).

Inspired by the *Brumaire*, some thinkers concluded that “class-in-itself” is a class devoid of class consciousness and peasantry as an objective reality is a “class-in-itself” but not a “class-for-itself” since it has no political or cultural expression of class identity (Cohen, qtd. in Andrew 578). Marx further says, “They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name ... They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (*Brumaire* 239). So, the peasantry is relegated to a class that is incapable of representing itself. Ranajit Guha’s position goes against this idea. Whereas Marx drew his idea from the role of 19th century French peasantry in facilitating the accession of Louis Bonaparte, Guha’s claim comes from his study of peasant insurgencies in colonial India. Guha contests that the “politics of the people.” of the subaltern (peasants) was an “autonomous domain” (“Historiography” 190). Guha brings forth the question of representation but with a different connotation than Marx’s. Not that they needed to be represented because they could not represent themselves but they were not deliberately represented, “clearly left out” by the elitist discourse of nationalist politics (180). Guha recognizes their politics as “autonomous domain” since peasant rebellions had all the elements of conscious movements – organized conscious leadership, some well-defined aim and definite objectives and means to achieve them (*Elementary* 4-5). For Guha, the peasantry is not a class devoid of class consciousness.

In Elias’ novels, how subjugated people negotiate with the idioms of exploitations in their everyday life and how their consciousness is articulated in resisting those idioms is depicted. Tamij’s trajectory can help to understand how peasant consciousness is articulated in *Khoabanma*. Tamij, as a day-laborer, worked in the region where the Tebhaga Movement broke out. Initially, Tamij was not a supporter of the Movement. Rather, he was a traditionalist, acknowledging the authority of the *Jotedars*. He despised the radical peasants and considered their action preposterous. He thought to himself, “The land belongs to the *Jotedars*. What amount of crops they get should be totally dependent on their will” (370). This Tamij later appears as an insurgent protester against exploitation. After his first season as a sharecropper, when the moment of crop distribution arrives, Tamij consciously experiences the exploitation of the *Jotedars* and his consciousness undergoes a transformation (464-67). That respectful and obedient Tamij is never found again, and in his place is someone insolent and rebellious. Guha stresses that insurgency is the site where “a conservative tendency made up of the ruling culture and a radical one oriented towards a practical transformation of the rebel’s conditions of existence – met for a

decisive trial of strength” and that is why insurgency can be taken as the mirror where the peasant consciousness is duly reflected (*Elementary* 11). Tamij goes through this decisive trial. There is this hegemony of the ruling culture which has made the peasants accept the beliefs and values that ultimately serves the ruling class and simultaneously there is an insurgent consciousness which challenges that hegemony too. The memory of the Tebhaga Movement often comes alive before Tamij when his grievance is expressed. He gets lost in the stream of thoughts when his eyes feast upon the field full of crops. The recollection of peasant agitation in the Tebhaga-flared region occupies his mind and he finds himself among the agitated peasants of the Movement. In his daydream he beats the *Jotedars* with sticks when they come to claim the share of the crops he alone produced (Elias, *Khoabnama* 394-95). Tamij is found at the vanguard when a group of fishermen defy the authority of Sharafat Mondol over the Katlahar Bil, and go to fish there (535). Tamij also leads the defiance against Kalam Majhi, the new lessee who, despite promising the fishermen to return them the right of the Katlahar, makes it his private property (637-42). Not only Tamij but also other characters like Tamij's father, Baikhuntha, Yudhisthira, and Keramot Ali express their resistance against the oppressor class on different occasions.

Even though they resist, they seem to lack a totalized understanding of class struggle that aims at the upheaval of the existing economic system. Neither does Elias attribute such kind of consciousness to them. Marx asserts that even if the peasants have grievances against the oppressors, the rents and interests, and the taxation system, they have no opposition against the whole economic system (cited in Andrew 580). The nature of their populist struggle can be militant but “populist struggles are not class conflict unless populists participate in struggles for dominion between potentially hegemonic classes” (Andrew 580). Georg Lukács asserts that for the other classes (except the bourgeois and the proletariat) within capitalism with economic roots lying in pre-capitalism, “class consciousness is unable to achieve complete clarity and to influence the course of history consciously” (55). The peasants of the Tebhaga Movement too could not guide the movement to a revolution which could transform the mode of production and property relations. Their demand was limited only to a two-third share of the crops. This limitation corresponds to Lukács' claim. Ernesto Laclau also notes that the demands of the workers in resistance are not always anti-capitalist or against the totality of the oppressive system per se but can be comprised of reformist agenda that could be solved within the system (qtd. in Žižek 319).

However, in *Khoabnama* the struggles of the peasants emerge based on how the world appears to them. The logic of exploitation appears to them in the form of famine, loaning from usurers, and mortgaging lands to *Jotedars* for subsistence and losing those lands afterwards. The depression of the 1930s and the Famine of 1943 accelerated pauperization and augmented the number of sharecroppers and agricultural laborers as they lost their lands to *Jotedars* and money-lenders (Cooper

244). The haunting memory of the famine and the appropriation of peasants' land by the *Jotedars* are recurring in *Khoabnama* too. The struggles of those peasants reflect the exploitations they are subjected to and how they want to abolish them. Their consciousness may not be the full-fledged "revolutionary class consciousness" but they too want to change the conditions that keeps on exploiting them.

The point of departure in *Khoabnama* is that class consciousness does not appear a telos there as it is to Lukács. For Lukács, consciousness is *sine qua non* for revolution and this consciousness has to be "imputed" by a revolutionary vanguard. Lenin too championed vanguard intellectuals who are not directly associated with the immediate production process as their distance from the production process would help them to have a totalized understanding of the class relations of capitalist society (Bottomore 90). On the other hand, the underlying tone of Elias' work seems to look out for an organic consciousness that develops itself from the subjective experiences of the oppressed people. This consciousness comes from experiences of everyday life, determined by the logic of exploitation they suffer, the idiom of resistance they come up with. Tamij's transformation from his submissive dormancy to a resistant agency manifests this organic consciousness. This transformation engenders from one's negotiation with the exploitation of his/her own labor. The consciousness that makes Tamij aware of his conditions and to resist develops organically from his subjective experience of everyday life and his negotiation with the exploitation he suffers. It is not imputed from outside by revolutionary intellectuals and activists. Nor it is always borrowed from somewhere else as Lukács claims, "Class consciousness of the peasants changes frequently ... because it is always borrowed from elsewhere" (61). Tamij's consciousness is hardly a borrowed one. The idea of this organic consciousness is more aligned with the thoughts of Rosa Luxemburg who thinks that the formation of class consciousness should be from the social experience of people's life, the experience of class struggle rather than coming from "professional revolutionaries" (Bottomore 90). Antonio Gramsci's ideas too correspond to the notion of an organic class consciousness as he writes, "Any revolutionary work has a chance of success only in so far as it finds itself on the necessities of their life and on the demands of their culture" ("Workers and Peasants"). Here, both the necessities and culture refer to the ones that developed organically from the lives of workers and peasants.

Besides, whereas Lukács's idea of class consciousness carries an inherent sense of economic determinism, this organic consciousness is not a direct determination of economic base but an overdetermined phenomenon by microcultural and micropolitical factors too. Louis Althusser thinks that even if the economic base in the last instance determines the superstructure, there is relative autonomy and reciprocal action of superstructure upon the base ("Ideology" 238). Class consciousness, in that sense, is not solely determined by the economic reality but by superstructural elements too. Ernesto Laclau even thinks that class antagonism is not a structural output of production relations since the workers as individual are

not solely the expression of economic base ("Structure" 202). They can experience the injustice done against them and in response, can resist due to cultural and other superstructural reasons too (cited in Žižek 319).

Mridula Mukherjee asserts that peasants' consciousness and actions are not products of a self-contained system but mediated by "the dialectic of recurrent oppression and resistance" (2176). Many "invisible" factors like the administrative and legal systems play a significant role along with the question of subsistence, land, tenancy, and occupancy in shaping the consciousness. Mukherjee argues that cultural factors like traditions and customs are indispensable to the shaping of peasant consciousness (2174). Pothik Ghosh too thinks that the stratification existing organically in the pre-capitalist communities and the psycho-cultural aspects can help to understand the immediate oppressive and hierarchical socio-economic dimensions of people's lives (134). The loyalty, the code of deference that Hurmatullah and early Tamij maintain towards the subjugating class, though originating from a certain relation of production, has, in fact, turned into a cultural code. Only when Tamij could break it, his rebel-consciousness became evident.

In Elias' *Chilekothar Sepai*, the shortcomings of imputed consciousness are insinuated. Anwar, an urban leftist, comes to the village to assess the "objective conditions" for revolutions and organize the peasants. However, he finds himself at a loss in the course of overwhelming events as he fails to understand the emotions, beliefs, conventions, practices, and culture of the peasants (93). He fails to communicate the philosophy of collective resistance with the peasants (106-07). He even hesitates to mingle with them as their odor irritates his olfactory nerves and rustic accent disturbs his sense of propriety (105, 186-87). In short, Anwar lacks the ability to understand the rural conditions in its organicity. This inability causes a split between the organic culture of the peasants and the urban leftist politics that ultimately results in the failure of the latter to bring any substantial revolutionary outcome. Here, the term culture is being used as the totality of lived experience and everyday practices. Anwar fails to turn himself into Gramsci's organic intellectual who "no longer consist in eloquence ... an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life" ("Intellectuals" 141). Unless the "vanguard intellectuals" can internalize the organic culture and language of the apparently revolutionary class in question, and become organically revolutionary intellectuals, imputed consciousness always gets trapped in that split.

Both novels embody the contradictions associated with organic consciousness and the impediments such contradictions lead to. Like micropolitical factors, the contradictions are overdetermined phenomenon too. An overdetermined contradiction, according to Althusser, "may either be overdetermined in the direction of a historical inhibition, a real 'block' for the contradiction or in the direction of revolutionary rupture ... but in neither condition it is ever found in the 'pure' state" ("Contradiction" 106). The dominant contradiction here is that the micropolitical

groups stand in the way of achieving a totalized class consciousness to form a class unity. In Elias, however, the micrological groups do not appear as involved in a hegemonic struggle with any particularistic demand. None of them particularly assumes the “function of universal representation” (Laclau, “Structure” 303). They do not appear as precursors to plural subjects of identity politics either. Their appearance serves only as a manifestation of inner contradiction of class structure. In *Khoabnama*, there is hardly any moment of united action of resistance that reflects the interest and long-term objectives of the whole class but only manifestations of resistance for immediate interests. The *majhis* stood together to claim their right over Katlahar Bil on multiple occasions but that too within a very limited scope. The marginalized people of Girirdanga and Nijgirirdanga are never found to stand united against the oppressors. Rather, when *majhis* stood against Shorafat Mondol, the *chasbas* like Hurmatullah and others worked as Mondol’s muscle. So, the unity, long term objectives, and the totality of class interest are hindered by the division they had among themselves. The objective of consciousness is to create a unity for concerted actions, as proclaimed by Marx – “workers of the world, unite!” But the micropolitical divisions affect class consciousness by disrupting class unity. The divisions which are culturally or superstructurally overdetermined are also the function of status consciousness. Lukács claims that “status consciousness masks class consciousness” and *Khoabnama* seems to testify to this claim (58).

The antagonism among people at the micro-level manifests the non-homogeneity of class consciousness. Lukács argues that class consciousness is divided within itself. This division of consciousness is owed to the micropolitics of class. Since class cannot articulate itself homogeneously and appears divided within itself, its influence is reflected in the realm of consciousness too. Laclau asserts that class unity comes under threat when the subject becomes decentered and fails to reinforce his/her identity as a social agent and “differential identitary logic” traverse class boundary to constitute identity which fails to intersect class positions (“Constructing” 300). The dissolution of people into micrological groups posits such impediments to class unity as evident in *Khoabnama*. This micropolitics accounts for a non-homogenous and divided consciousness that stands as an impediment to united actions of the marginalized classes.

Another historical impediment the organic consciousness apparently suffered, as depicted in Elias’ novels, is the subversion of the radical impulses of the marginalized class by the nationalist elites. The Tebhaga Movement was exclusively a peasant movement but the Muslim League (ML) appropriated the rhetoric of Tebhaga. Pothik Ghosh comments that the communal politics of ML “thrived only by drawing sustenance from the radical politics of Tebhaga movement.” (117). Taj Ul-Islam Hashmi calls this phenomenon “communalization of class struggle” where the “the attainment of Pakistan” was regarded “as the final step towards an egalitarian system” (219). In *Khoabnama*, ML leader Ismail declared that in Pakistan, Tebhaga would be implemented congenitally (499). After independence, when Tamij reminds

Kader of their promise, Kader is vexed and mocks Tamij for his sharp memory (602, 647). In *Chilekothar Sepai*, the appropriation of Bairageer Bheeta stands as the symbolic consequence of the movement of 1969 (204, 244). The space created by the radical impetus of the peasants is seized by the compromising nationalist middle class, and the demands and aspirations of the peasants and working class people were deferred and relegated. Such a portrayal very conspicuously articulates the pitfalls of both national consciousness and the defeat of organic consciousness as it cannot be manifested through united actions of the subjugated class which is micrologically divided.

It seems that to explore the formative dimension of class consciousness, if formed in the first place, *Khoabnama* hosts a setting where the Tebhaga Movement did not have a firm root. The geographical contour of the novel predominantly covers the villages where the stories and rumors of the Movement often invade the landscape, the gust of fear infects the *Jotedars* but the flame of the Movement is absent. However, this deliberate distance is not without merits. Partha Chatterjee finds that the vigor of the Tebhaga was absent in some districts of North Bengal where “a new stratum of sharecroppers” was created from rising differentiation (198). And the *Jotedars* having effective control over the means of production set the background of a distinct exploitative milieu. How the experience of encountering exploitation and negotiation with it through conformation and resistance affects the formation of consciousness is portrayed in *Khoabnama*. On the other hand, the setting of the novel in the region where the Movement was already in full motion, would predominantly manifest the expressive dimension of consciousness – the concerted actions against the oppressors. If the expressive dimension is considered to be a yardstick to assess the result of consciousness, then Elias cannot be taken to be totally oblivious of it. In his novels it is rather explored why the consciousness, developed from an organic negotiation with life and its intimate experiences cannot deliver the desired result.

Here, one thing is clear that the hint of organic consciousness is found developing on the individual level only. Tamij through his subjective experiences of everyday life attains it but most of the peasants remain subjugated by the dominant world-view. On some occasions they manifest united actions but ultimately they are found to be lacking a strong class organization. The consciousness imputed by the vanguard intellectuals is not coherent with the organic living conditions of the subjugated class and the organic consciousness does not arise evenly from every individual of a class and locality. For Elias, the oppressed classes in general are neither class-in-itself nor class-for-itself. Elias' dialectical outlook to society and history keeps no room for a telos of finality like class-for-itself. Class consciousness for Elias is never a state of being but always a process of becoming. In his last appearance in *Khoabnama*, fugitive Tamij rides a train to go looking for a possibility to fight for the Tebhaga. The way his daughter is presented in the very last lines of the novel hints at the new site of material struggle where people will keep on fighting. Borrowing the phrase

from Adam Przeworski, it can be said that, for Elias, a class is always a class-in-struggle (qtd. in Andrew 583). It is not to be reducible to the fixed idea of class-in-itself or class-for-itself. A dialectical view of history can only accommodate an idea like class-in-struggle and in Elias' novels, it is evident.

An attentive investigation into the micropolitics of class and class consciousness can help to overcome the prevalent mechanical understanding of those concepts and to grasp the inner dialectics of class struggle with its embedded contradictions. It exposes the split between the structural formation of class and its articulation in emancipatory politics which Akhtaruzzaman Elias' critical and dialectical vision captures astutely.

Note

1. All quotations used in this paper from *Khoabnama* and *Chilekothar Sepai* are the author's own translation as no recognized translations of these two novels are published yet in English.

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